THE DISCOURSE OF PRAYING: READING NEHEMIAH 1

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1. The Art of Praying: Religious Shock and Literary Skills

How does one pray in a state of shock? Nehemiah, after having been informed about the walls of Jerusalem being ruined and its gates being burnt, sits down, weeps and mourns for days, as the text of Neh. 1:4 says. After that he expresses a prayer that demonstrates a high level of mastering the idiom of prayer as we know it from Solomon’s prayer in the books of Kings and Chronicles. It is a prayer also with a clear and well-composed structure. Whose language is this? Most commentators find it difficult to relate the well-composed prayer of vv. 5–11 directly to the state of shock Nehemiah appears to be in. So, can this really be his language? Can it be his text?

If one begins ones reading of Nehemiah 1 with questions like these, one actually also raises a question of method. What should exegesis aim at, find an explanation for what is observed in the text as difficulties? Such as the difficulty that the professional reader finds it hard to believe that a state of shock and grief might lead to a literary well designed prayer? This is the main point in Klaus Baltzer’s evaluation of the tradition of scholarly research of this prayer: ‘The prayer of Nehemiah in Neh. 1 has not received a particularly warm reception among exegetes. Its authenticity has been the main issue in the discussion.’ And indeed research seems to continue just into this direction. For example, if one reads the Biblischer Kommentar on Nehemiah, one can see how K.-D. Schunck plunges directly into the ‘difficulties’ of the text by the statement: ‘In der jetzt vorliegenden Form gibt der Abschnitt mehrere Probleme auf.’ (‘In its actual form this section presents a number of problems’). Triggered by the tensions observed in Nehemiah 1 between vv. 2–4 and 5–11 exegetes tend to try to overcome the difficulties by


asking questions about reconstruction: what process produced the ‘difficulties’? Where does this text come from?

Working along this line of research one in fact asks two types of questions about the prayer in Nehemiah 1:

1. Is the text of the prayer in Neh. 1:5–11 an original part of the composition, called the Memoir of Nehemiah (i.e., the narrative sections in first person singular in the book, presumably originating from Nehemiah’s report on his work in Jerusalem, or his letter of defence about his policies)?

2. What is the genre of this prayer? Is it a complaint, a confession? A prayer of penitence and intercession? Could it be an existing text of a penitential prayer, inserted into Nehemiah 1? Or is this prayer of a mixed genre, a text composed from the phraseology of liturgical tradition, and slightly adapted to fit the context of Nehemiah 1?

These questions belong to a research type that wants to know more about the author: Is it Nehemiah himself or is it someone else? In addition one tries to assign the text to a general category, a type of prayer, a particular religious idiom. That is, can we locate this prayer somewhere in the history of the religion of Israel? In fact these are questions of the type: who owns this text?

These are fair questions for biblical research, they need to be asked and in the final section of this paper I want to contribute to the research into the reconstruction of the text by defending the option that an existing liturgical prayer has been reworked and inserted into the Nehemiah Memoir. However, in this conference on Psalms and Prayers we are also invited to consider different research questions, i.e.: can we as its readers understand the prayer’s design? The programme of today’s Joint Meeting phrases a statement that goes far beyond the area of reconstruction. It says: ‘a renewed study of prayer as a form of religious expression could be helpful to our multicultural and secularized Western societies’. Which implies, could the study of a text such as Nehemiah 1 help us to understand more of the art of praying? This clearly is a question not from the domain of literary reconstruction, but from the domain of biblical theology.

Put this way the textual analysis faces a new challenge. For, the outcome of textual reconstruction in several commentaries does not reveal much about praying as such. Rather one reaches the conclusion that the prayer in Nehemiah 1 is just piling up pious phrases from deuteronomistic stock about the sins of Israel, which results in